

England 'Ghosts' British Art – a frieze.



Craig Richardson



Can one talk about nations as though they were individuals? And supposing that one can, is there any genuine continuity between the England of today and the England of the past?

George Orwell, *The English People*

Homelands

The British Council exhibition of British art *Homelands – A 21st Century of Home, Away, and All the Places in Between*,¹ curated by Latika Gupta, was first exhibited in 2013 at the IGNCA Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts in New Delhi. IGNCA is midway between Edwin Landseer Luytens' India Gate, which commemorates 70,000 dead Indian soldiers who fought for Britain during World War 1 as well as the Indians and Britons who died in the third Anglo-Afghan War of 1919, and Luytens' design for what became the present-day Republic's Presidential Residence Rashtrapati Bhavan. The Residence was completed in 1929, Luytens was the primary architect, with a dome inspired by the Pantheon it is a prime example of Edwardian Baroque, and was originally designed as the residence of The Viceroy of India.

Before visiting *Homelands* (after Salman Rushdie, 2010) it was instructive to stand outside the gates of the Residence to ponder India's rapid metropolitan expansion and sample British colonial legacy. Luytens' New Delhi has the look of Central London but is of a more persuasive sensual experience.² In the upward periphery black kites soared and a trail of langur monkeys left the Presidential grounds by climbing over the Palace Gates. The langurs are so profuse because they were deployed to chase away aggressive, other, 'monkey menace'. No more – as a protected

species under the Wildlife Protection Act 'hiring' these protection squads has been declared illegal. Meanwhile a concrete jungle is sprouting all around Delhi. British colonial legacies are disappearing into the Indian future amidst the spirited acceleration of gas-driven rickshaws. And these sonic surroundings deliver on the encoded symbolism of the wheel at the centre of the Republican flag - that India must 'move and go forward'.³

Homelands' works of British origin and subjects included a number of documentary works from socially-engaged artists. The British looking at Great Britain tended to represent the UK as eccentric or distressed, the exhibition selection was a consciously reflective examination of the Us and Them 'othering' that dominates the current political debate in UK. The particularities of cultures found in the metropolitan centres and their suburban peripheries were also necessary presences. Paul Graham examined the political division of society in 1980s Northern Ireland and Anthony Haughey provided intimate representations of domestic religious piety. Angus Boulton documented London's homeless, Anthony Lam subverted the core genre in English art - landscape - overlaying the picturesque with bureaucratic language drawn from the British Government's 2002 White Paper, 'Secure Borders, Safe Haven: Integration with diversity in Modern Britain'.

The extended argument was one of national hybridity, the meaning of hospitality and cultural difference. Who are the British and what is Britishness? Closed doors seemed to be one answer. The enforcement of the UK's national boundaries seemed dominant. Seemingly absent was a visual representation on why London has become an unregulated apex of globalization, an open-door of sorts, maintaining some of its global power through financial services (behind closed doors). At the same time *Homelands* astutely acknowledged politico-cultural changes which even ten years ago might not have been considered relevant to modern Britain, such as interfaith and religion. This is unavoidable in an exhibition on modern-day Britain, such concerns are those expressed in Prince Charles' desire to extend his future ecumenical interest to an inter-faith Monarchy, which may become a stepping-stone towards a truly secular state. The curatorial 'message', which might have

become overly stipulative in its representation of urgent contemporary issues, gained authenticity through its global perspective and its leavening by conceptual-surrealist gestures such as Cornelia Parker's *Meteorite lands on Buckingham Palace* (1998). Where 'British art' is concerned there must always been the compulsion towards eccentricity, after all it is a well-known a facet of the British character. Perhaps this is the wry response to Britain as a place with laws and customs that proscribe belonging through enforced boundaries, and has a suburban prescription of social norms. Melancholic suburban gardens, and melancholic interiors with bold stylizations which envelop this surreal environment.⁴ David Bowie escaped it, Grayson Perry embraced it. Whenever this real place, this real country, attempts to speak to the world it is threatened with the gloss of a vague (British Council) corporatism that seeks to universalize its visual character with an *imaginary* hospitable Britishness.

So here I want to imagine a monument to England, visualized upon which is the work of its so-called 'British artists', and some of those artists in processional conversation with one another, in a frieze of English Art.

The Sense of an Ending

Anticipating this selection of postwar and contemporary exhibitions, critical overviews and characterisations, political discourses and visual art practices, which implicitly and explicitly develop and contribute to the idea of contemporary English Art, it is essential that a definition of Britishness is discussed, and dismissed. The political context of this essay is an ongoing separation of the UK's regions and at the same time the emergence of a cultural archive within contemporary English culture, which may be said, for all the faults of such a project, to contribute to an ongoing definition of English national character.

The long history of English art has numerous starting points that precede 1707, the year of the political Treaty of Union between the kingdoms of Scotland and England. The Union is irrelevant here, its tercentennial was a muted affair, Unionism has not been an easy cause nor in easy usage for some time. Britain, the shorthand term for 'United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland' as introduced in 1927 by the Royal and Parliamentary Titles Act to reflect the reality of the de facto independence of the Irish Free State, which was created by the partitioning of Ireland in 1922, and which left Northern Ireland as the only part of the island of Ireland still within the UK, is equally hardly arguable as the current etymology of the common term 'British' or 'Britishness'. By appending Britain 'Great' a definition is encouraged that all the regional-nations of Britain are *together as separate* from Europe. This is partially true. Like the Republic of Ireland, Great Britain remains outside of the borderless Europe developed through the Schengen Agreement. But the British regions are qualitatively different in their response to this united 'outsiderly-ness', particularly in relation to European ideals. However if any unifying quality could be used to define the current political mood in Northern Ireland, England and Scotland, it is the critical disquiet that our affiliation is not workable on any long-term governing level. Britishness in such a context has to be regularly adjusted to respond to official need just as the structures of the State develop

in response to internal demand. It is often thought that constitution-less Great Britain is a concept of genius in constant flux, but finally it is not infinitely malleable.

Has the ship of Britishness already run aground? The State has tried to explicitly define the British character in recent years, applying to it values such as "a commitment to tolerance and fair play", to quote Gordon Brown's 2004 British Council lecture.⁵ But such a commitment can just as easily be applied to corporate multinational tax avoidance schemes as well as the mutuality of a common ethos. Values such as 'tolerance' have lost some of their meaning in such a flexible constitution and some even view with dark suspicion its application. Westminster Government would like to develop a British statement of values that sets out the ideals and principles that bind the regions together, but Government does not have any idea as to how a broadly based national debate could be conducted. It seems to only respond when threatened by external values, thereby alluding to 'a British way of life'.

Great Britain is in the midst of a divisive phase, fuelling the air of End-ism surrounding the United Kingdom project. The detailed compact in which a pursuit of common standards of public service delivery and universal benefits which underpinned everything since the end of World War Two is also in dispute. As Arthur Aughey wrote, 'there are also across the United Kingdom expectations among citizens that common standards in public services will be maintained' (see footnote 8). But this universalism is in retreat. Moral pursuits such as the lessening of relative child poverty are now tangential to national governance. Inequality is rampant.

Great Britain, often cast as pragmatic, but only grudgingly hybrid and awkwardly lacking the spirit of compromise, is becoming un-seamed by explorations of further regional and national devolution, not just in Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales, but also Cornwall, the North of England (where the idea of a borderlands polity partnering South Scotland with North England is gaining traction), and London. And emerging through this un-seaming, *Englishness* as a contemporary cultural quality is far less fraudtly contested than it once was mainly because its un-tethering from Britishness. This has in part

come about through its reverse engineering through a resurgence of Scottishness and Irishness via devolution referenda, and with Scottish, Irish and English self-identity increasingly embraced by diasporic communities all over the world (the celebration of St George's Day is on the rise in the US). Devolution has also contributed to newly found regional identity to be celebrated by immigrant communities. And artists want to work *within* regional-national-historical legacies and their present-day complex manifestations: Scottish art, English art, Irish art; each entail acknowledging differences as well as shared continuities.

British Art and Britishness

'British Art' is a hypothesis which has power only in unexamined practice. But as a modern-day theory it warns 'keep off. And yet, like another warning – 'Wet Paint' – encounters with it yearn to be tested. The parameters of British art might seem invitingly relaxed; art is produced by artists residing in Britain, some of who have permanently settled and become part of the culture of place. Or art produced for British patrons in an extended affiliation. Expatriates and British overseas connections are a considerable influence, and so on. But we can say much the same of Scottish art, Welsh art or English art; regional-national types that are best defined by extended inclusion, with each reiteration and re-envisioning bringing challenges to the fixity of geography and belonging. Holbein was not English and yet 'Holbeins' are at the core of British national collections and his exemplary portraits played a consequential role in England's formative events. Holbein and other British antecedents aside, makers of British art, while normally found in institutions prefixed with the term British, are not so comfortably connected to a substantive meta-narrative of Britishness. British art is multi-faceted. Where the institutions work best is when they are imbued with a regional-national ideation, as if to say each British artist is from somewhere local too; through John Constable's paintings *The Stour weaves*, through the valleys, along the hamlet's edge; Frank Auerbach's solitary denizens haunt London's city-parks, each an unknowable person, their smudged shadow painted as impenetrable daubs.

Tate Britain and other British Museums cannot imaginably attempt to offer an experiential equivalent of the character and values thought to be inherent to the Nation when British character opposes that very notion, the British character is better at supporting specific inflections. This was acknowledged at the beginning of the twenty-first century when Stephen Deuchar, then Director of the newly named Tate Britain, stressed the nature of the problem insisting 'Tate Britain's programme is not intended to be an extended investigation into the Britishness of British art.'⁶ While Tate Britain's collected facets do not culminate in an agreed existence of Britishness, even if the Collection might reach

for, or be thought to exemplify in its connective chronology, unspoken national characteristics, it remains a quandary. By implication our visit to such an institution is to provide the elusive something that tells us collective truths about Great Britain, and what we do.

One provisional answer is found in the direction of Tate Britain's perpetual reinvention of the avant-garde past through the reorganization of its collection. Inhabited with what was once new it now enables unexpected movements from the past to stay remembered. Does Britain remain a forum for slowly unfolding and sometimes awkward new ideas? Tate Britain offers an emphatic 'Yes'. How those who come to Great Britain, particularly those granted residence, participate in social bonding enabled through cultural affiliation, is a more complicated issue. Tate Britain is player in the business of British historiography, and not nation-building. But national institutions have to speak for the nation in whatever they do. The source of contemporary anxiety is the State of the Union, and other anxieties about how to preserve regional distinctiveness (your 'region' is my 'country' etc). And Britain's major Museums cannot, must not, want to over-promote a homogenous cultural nationality because of the toxic political claims of an indigenous people of Britain, and at worst conjure the fear of racial 'volkschness' (the folkloric with overtones of nation, race, tribe) and the prejudice which that has produced in Britain in the past when blood was threatened to run. The ethical promise of art has little to do with wanting to impose on others received ideas of allegiance and affiliation.

Regionalism and 'Cynefin'

When the political centre defines the character of Britishness the spectrum of alliance becomes very stretched, especially its assumption of complicity when it's asked of people from the geographic peripheries of Britain. Nationality-definition assumes a fixed position not to everyone's taste, declaration is preferably a private exercise. The reality of contemporary Britain means there is always the regional inflection; regional and inter-regional identities often prevail over the National. For many the term Britishness specifically means not Greatness but Englishness. Not a criticism per se, the term has almost no function whatsoever in Scotland where 'British' is accepted pro tem to refer to an historical Union with significant concerns about its positive application in the spectrum of contemporary social and cultural life.

Alan Riach's pamphlet 'Was there ever a 'British' Literature?', penned in 2007 by the only Professor of Scottish Literature (Glasgow University), outlines the constraints of British-national definition which he contrasts with the values inherent in an inter-regional identity formed through *voluntary* association and belonging. Riach reproduced Andrew McNeillie's poem *Cynefin Glossed*. 'Cynefin' (Kuh-ne-fin) is a Welsh word commonly translated into English as 'habitat' or 'place' and 'belonging-ness', although a more complete translation would be that it conveys the sense that we all have multiple pasts of which we can only be partly aware: cultural, religious, geographic, tribal. Once this concept is accepted, it is difficult to see how artists and poets are able to work without 'Cynefin' influencing and even determining what they do. The second stanza asks

*For example, tell me in a word how
you'd express a sense of being that
embraces belonging here and now,
in the landscape of your birth and death,
its light and air, and past, at once, and what
cause you might have to give it breath?*

The final line's homophone deliberately enlists support ('cos) *you might have to give it breath?* Riach's pamphlet gives us some personal context for the poem's author, McNeillie's father was an important novelist in Scotland but moved South, McNeillie grew up in Wales but lived in Ireland for a long time, so Riach affirms

The political structure of 'British' identity does not allow for the specific, national loyalty voiced by [the Scottish poet] Hugh MacDiarmid or [the Welsh poet David Gwenallt Jones]. And something more than Britishness produced McNellie's profound question about language and identity. Poets intuitively understand this. The evidence is there. But as scholars, whose business is research and recovery, teaching and conveying the information that matters, we are required to look more deeply into national traditions and areas of work that have been covered up or forgotten.⁷

Poets, Riach suggests, are intuitively allied to a specific voice and not a vague national uber-culture, so when the term 'British' is applied to a culture its first and central deficiency is how it obscures those aspects which are potentially more important and perhaps authentic, however elusive and uneasy.⁸ Just as Riach would like to be rid of the increasingly redundant term 'British', as an obstacle to asking more interesting cultural questions, something similar is taking place in British art. If you agree with Riach's reasoning it effectively renders 'British art' as an unconvincing term. But not so if the term denotes practices and characteristics primarily and collectively related to Englishness. Britishness can only exist as a theoretical identity as it entails separation from other hybrid identities and regional inflections with which it normally competes. In its common usage Britishness *means* Englishness, and Englishness does have a practical application and examined practice which is evident in the work of modern and contemporary English artists, some of whom are more commonly known as 'Young British Artists', or other groups such as the 'Black Artists', who have imbued English art with meaningful character and dynamism during the last thirty years. However, there is also little agreement as to what constitutes Scottish art or Irish art or English art (although the regional adjective functions well as a supposition in other cultural forms such as poetry and literature). Even in a situation where 'British art' is synonymous with 'English art', 'English art' retains its tendency to produce critical disquiet even when deployed in England. Englishness rarely has an uncomplicated or acquiescent reception.

Englishness, clouds on the horizon

Claims of an English art come at a cost. Great Britain, third most populated island in the world, surrounded by a thousand smaller British islands, has an islophilia which is unavoidably reflected in the national visual culture; living in insularity, sometimes prone to nostalgia, ready for tests of its resilience. Critical disquiet arising from the island-mentality is heightened when theories of national culture take on a racist complexion, easily misrecognised as a highly politicized espousal of a dominant national culture, or advocacy of national 'regeneration'. A formulation of English art in the context of nation-building would be troublingly prescriptive, should overt reference to national characteristics in English art be considered in a similar light?

Nikolaus Pevsner described his well-known 1955 Reith lectures, on *The Englishness of English Art*, an experiment in 'the geography of art'. Pevsner, author of forty-six books on *The Buildings of England*, was famously prey to generalizing a national character in art: by which it was meant that once the individual maker's style has been taken into account there is the school with which the work is associated, the country and then the race amongst which it was produced (Wolfflin). The immigrant sensibility of Pevsner's intentions were explained in his Radio Times introduction to his Reith lectures, 'In trying to find my bearings twenty years ago in a strange and attractive country, I could not keep the Englishness of English art separate from the Englishness of the English in other fields.'⁹ Pevsner suggested that 'In order to see clearly what's what in the national character, it is perhaps a good thing at one stage to have come in from outside and then to have settled down to become part of it'. The argument is that outsiderliness enhances appreciation and the scholarly assertion of distinction. Pevsner had pursued a list of qualities that would define his canon of Englishness from when he arrived in England in the early 1930s by asking the question 'What is English in English art' in reviewing an exhibition of nine centuries of British art at the Royal Academy.¹⁰ In the genres he considered the English excelled, portraiture and landscape, 'he found qualities of humour, reserve,

pragmatism, stoicism, tolerance and a spirit of compromise',¹¹ in the words of his painstaking biographer Susie Harries. Art would be used to adorn objects of everyday use. The English were a highly practical people, makers of sturdy furniture and unchippable ceramics but there was also a capacity for escapism. In sum, no great concepts, no sweep of passionate engagement, rather a gift for observation. But by the late 1930s Pevsner found the urge to set up national contrasts compelling, the ability of English and German people's abilities to produce and enjoy art were compared. Later the Austrian-born art historian Ernst Gombrich suggested the German-born Pevsner had been tactless.

Pevsner's observations concerning English art were also concerned with English objectivity, and sometimes relate to naturalness. The English outdoors meant that all the genres of art which embraced it, landscape painting, gardening and sporting pictures 'were inevitably conditioned by the English weather',¹² as if to follow on from Constable's own phrase that his art was 'be found under every hedge, and in every lane'.¹³ Leaving such agreeable pastoralism aside, it was a suggestion of a racial idea of art that caused upset in Pevsner's Reith Lectures. Their reception ranged from critical disquiet to blame for feeding back to the English a set of self-approving myths. Pevsner, it was thought, ought to have known that espousing a National Culture can be easily confused with promoting dangerous ideas of National Regeneration. John Berger believed Pevsner should have produced a more social, political and economic argument that explained the qualities of society's art. But what of the reception of Pevsner's broadcast and his closing appeal 'Please get to know the history of English art', what did it feel at the time to hear of Pevsner's high-pitched voice, crackling away through the radio. Attempting to tell the English about the *Englishness of English Art*, coming out of Austerity Britain a few years off from when the pragmatic Prime Minister MacMillan would tell his Conservative party 'We've never had it so good'? The architectural historian Anthony Quiney wrote 'the fact that later people said there wasn't much truth in it hardly mattered to me. This was a spur to go and look for myself'.¹⁴ The passing years have been kinder to Pevsner's intent. In 2001 a conference at the V&A noted

Pevsner 'saw national identity as something that changes according to situation [not] some endemic characteristic that would constantly reassert itself in new situation'.¹⁵ Ashgate's *Reassessing Nikolaus Pevsner* (2004, ed. Peter Draper) included essays on Pevsner's influence which have brought his contemporary relevance to the fore, particularly in Ian Christie's 'What counts as art in England: how Pevsner's minor canons became major' and Andrew Causey on 'Pevsner and Englishness'.





Trophies of the English School

There have been a number of attempts at comprising artists within Schools of 'British art' however the field is characterised by its 'flinty, solitary loners' (a phrase which Christopher Hitchens used in defence of George Orwell against Raymond Williams' claim Orwell was not a good communitarian). They tend to confuse any agreed sense of a national project or refuse to uphold a progressive direction of travel in the nation's art. Generally speaking they do not wish to be coerced into an established school nor to have their art co-opted for overt national-curatorial purposes.¹⁶ English art's awkward variants include its critics, collectors, art historians and commentators and unlike American art it cannot ever be a failed National project because it doesn't play like that, the typology is one in which the primacy of the individual artist's project or vision dominates. The individualism in the practices of Bacon, Hamilton or Hepworth succeeded because England supports cultural dissension. Curators of British art at the Tate have wrestled with a chronology of movements for decades. They may worry as they try to squeeze the awkward squad into a tight fitting exhibition theme, worrying that they might have placed the Toby jugs on the shelf reserved for the crystalware.

The 'problem' of individual vision in the context of an English art typology is encapsulated in the Midlands-based John Hyatt's banner-like painting *ART, WARS, DIVISION, AND DESIGN* (JUNE – AUGUST 1982). Hyatt's painting was detailed on the cover of the 1983 *British Art Show* catalogue and represents an English iconography within an industrialized landscape. Abstraction, juxtaposed fragments and English motifs merge in this sprawling post-industrial 'nowhere' landscape, as if glimpsed from a fast moving car. Pylons are on the warpath under a sky of red, white and blue. A feature of this carnival is the transposition of David Hockney's American glimmer of swimming-pool summertime, *The Splash* (1966). An emblematic lion and unicorn will soon disrupt Hockney's stillness of abstraction. The painting includes textual inter-lacing, Marx is paraphrased on human nature. Different types of production are represented (energy, cultural) and different types of visual and literary communica-

tion add to the garble and panoply. The painting is a visual companion of sorts to Costello and Langer's mournful song *Shipbuilding* (1982) and can also be tied to a particular moment during the 1980s, when the cultured Left was reclaiming the message of William Blake's *Jerusalem* (circa 1804) from its long-time establishment co-option. Hyatt's painting was completed at a time of intense political and societal shift in Britain, its start date of June 1982 was aligned to the end of The Falklands War.

English Culture and modern Industry in Hyatt's oddly picturesque painting is awash with a parade of political and stylistic strife, set in a modern landscape very unlike that of England's mythic pastoral. It has elements of protest; what is England and where is its *worth*. Hyatt positions chimneys and pylons as though they were opposing troops on a battlefield. Even the refuge of Heritage, the cherished 'old ways', seem a distant prospect as remnants of 19th century industry jostle with the aggressive poverty of the modern. The England pastoral vision, it seems to suggest, can only be now found in the greenbelt. Our environment, divided by motorways, is as exhausted as that once described by J.B. Priestley in his pre-War *English Journey*, 'a cynically devastated countryside, sooty dismal little downs, and still sootier grim fortress-like cities'.¹⁷

And yet at the same time, the painting requires an actively engaged viewer. This work has a manifesto. The English culture represented in the work is both literary and visual, and insists upon a self-realizing capacity. Hyatt utilizes appropriation and allusion, as with many of the well-known paintings of the period, however its historiography is satirical, regional and allegorical. Taken together, the elements of Hyatt's painting straddle a number of stylistic and political themes emerging before and after its production, as well as arising from the apex of Britain's North and South. Its inclusion in a British art survey during a key moment in which British culture would not become closed-off to new ideas of national identity *but might have become*, demonstrated England's capacity for critical self-renewal during times of restricted resources and cultural strife. Now in Leeds it remains a complex puzzle of post-modernism, in a modern English vernacular setting.

The avant-garde in postwar English art has emerged through such loose affiliation of North and South and with other UK regions, and modernist and post-modernist connections and vernacular continuities constitute the palimpsest which make up English art. While the significant groups are almost exclusively associated with multi-cultural London, London is a place of arrival. British Pop art, which sprang from the Independent Group in the early 1950s, included the Edinburgh-born artist Eduardo Paolozzi (whose slide show presented at the first Independent Group meeting in 1952, included *I was a Rich Man's Plaything* (1947) with first use of the word 'pop' incorporated into a visual context; a cloud of smoke emerging from a revolver). The Independent Group, Richard Hamilton, Reynier Banham, Lawrence Alloway was also formed of diapsoric Scots, Glaswegian John McHale (thought to have coined the term Pop Art) and Dundonian William Turnbull.

The designation of the place of birth rather than the individual's residence as an overriding identification in British art is confusing, into which the respective 'Art School' affiliations are often pivotal identifiers. Scottish and English art have key moments in which significant movements cohere around a city and an agenda formed within an art department. In Scotland, during the 1980s *New Image Glasgow's* figurative painting had an impetus which included conjoining of political and magical realisms as a route out of the cul-de-sac of late-modern conceptual art - set within the broader context of (failed) Scottish Independence and the contestable function of painting within, or exemplifying emerging, definitions of national character. It was short-lived but was an important critical genesis in Scottish art. Concurrently a longer-lasting grouping of sculptors coalesced around London's Lisson Gallery. Germany-resident Tony Cragg and Welshman Richard Deacon's development of an organic abstract tradition were much closer in intent to the great English sculptor Anthony Caro's achievements, and his reading of Henry Moore, than Caro's own students at Saint Martins College ever were (one of whom was the Glasgow trained Bruce Maclean).¹⁸ The Lisson sculptors are undeniably enduring, in contrast with the expiration of *New Image*. Antony Gormley and Mumbai-born Anish

Kapoor hold ambassadorial roles for sanctioned British culture, and England. Their powerful symbols and effects first appeared in Kapoor's *Tarantantara* (1999) in the space now known as The Baltic in Newcastle upon Tyne, and Gormley's *Angel of the North* (1998) in Low Fell, the latter becoming a regional icon and a popular national symbol (dressed up with Alan Shearer's shirt, its macquette valued in Antiques Roadshow, and represented in miniature in Legoland).

The diversity of practices which have come to re-signify English art, as well as 'Black British art' as we move in to the 21st Century, include Yinka Shonibare, Steve McQueen and Chris Ofili, but had precedents in the 1980s which are often relegated in contemporary histories. One group in particular sought to recontextualise British art in practice with British post-colonial legacies exhibitions such as *Trophies of Empire* (1992–4).¹⁹ Donald Rodney, Kieth Piper and Eddie Chambers were often grouped and exhibited alongside with Lubaina Himid, Sonia Boyce and Zarina Bhimji and others. Their works were suffused with personal experience defined within their contemporary national political conditions. This was their conflation and it took a variety of forms, often in mixed media or collaged structures. The cultural politics which later determined the relative success, or lack of, of many Black Artist's careers, specifically via gallery representation, critical reception and establishment overture (for want of a better phrase), has recently been charted in Eddie Chambers' *Things Done Change – The Cultural Politics of Recent Black Artists in Britain* (2012). In the Introduction Chambers set out the problems of national definition, both noting that Black Artists,²⁰ to use the term he first publicly denoted in 1981, are not a group as such and that 'English' may far too easily elide into 'British' (or its reverse, as Pevsner and other art historians were wont to do). Artists, black or any other, may nor necessarily self-nominate as Black, English or anything else, but as the exhibition *Trophies of Empire* demonstrated, Black Artists are not responsible for ameliorating the deficiencies of Britain's colonial past, although they are the most effective practitioners in such a project. In Black British art History becomes a contemporary resource able to be reimagined as well as faithfully archived through fresh thinking,

and which charts the historical expansion and subsequent decline of the British Empire with a clear focus on its many legacies imprinted on British society.²¹ Their shared project might be one of How to prevent the active forgetting of British history's discordant notes? And in doing so How to avoid nostalgia, and to utilize and analyze these political 'messages' in their present-day experience? When to show up representations of power and legitimacy as invention; when to reinvent; what to keep, what to discard, what to lose, and how to speak of it all? These are profound conceptual as well as practical challenges. As Chambers said of *Doublethink* (1992), a centerpiece of *Trophies of Empire*, 'the work obliged the viewer to consider the inescapable dualities, irreconcilable positions and tormenting contradictions of race and racism.'²² Gilane Tawadros's earlier elaboration described how it might be done, through dissonance and by fragments,

*History (and memory), Rodney seems to suggest, is made up of a series of fragments which, viewed in isolation, are slightly discomfoting but singular incidents. Seen as a whole, layer upon layer, fragment upon fragment, these single strands made up a dissonant orchestra of Britain's imperial legacy which continues into our present lives.*²³

English Magic

This short composition of key moments of English art in the late 1950s – late 1980s is eclipsed by the successes of the post-conceptual schools emerging from London during the 1990s, quickly supported by Charles Saatchi and new commercial spaces such as Karsten Schubert and later White Cube.²⁴ The figurehead remains Damien Hirst, a centerpiece of exhibitions with immodest titles such as *Brilliant* and *Sensation*. Hirst, like Hockney, is one of those awkward figures in contemporary art. Firstly, his early works including *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living* (1991) are a profoundly compelling popular spectacle. Secondly, there is a lingering sense that if he did not exist he would have to be invented; the branding of his work has followed an emulation of the Warholian art-factory model and its emergence via celebrity. Those who condemn Hirst for the fact that he does not fabricate his own work miss the point, for the factory model has been displaced by the development he has brought to it and to 'British art', that he is, for want of a better term, a franchise. His work is of an irregularly dependable quality, but often purveyed in periodically brilliant acts of marketing which obscure critical analysis. And finally, his auction sales are considered a benchmark of economic vitality (not simply art's vitality) and, so rather than challenging market behavior, he has reinforced it. These three points are not qualitative evaluations. The point is we should all hear about Hirst even if we cannot see the work – the aim is to be ubiquitous.

While Hirst sits outside of historical norms, the pragmatism and stoicism of Englishness are the guiding paths towards a peripeteia in which the tropes of conceptual art merged with the themes of English character, perfectly encapsulated in Richard Long, and identified in key exhibitions such as 1972's *The New Art*.²⁵ Exhibitions such as this, and English landscape in general, has its own challenges, but in retrospect it helped to distinguish English Art as one with an ongoing legacy; such is the presence of contemporary artist's reference to England's pastoral myths and legends. In 2012 the neo-pastoralist Jeremy Deller reinvented one of the symbols the nation, through his correlation of ancient and contemporary modes of thought

inspired in part by his avowed love of Avebury (which directly links Deller to Paul Nash). *Sacrilege* is an inflatable recreation of Stonehenge, which Deller described as a 'British monument as a bouncy structure, so people can bounce on it, and enjoy culture, and enjoy heritage'.²⁶ First exhibited during the 2012 Glasgow International Festival and a key work of the Cultural Olympiad, Deller is drawn to features of an English national memory archive and its place in contemporary England. The uncritical reception of how English art has been perceived and understood over time, both at home and abroad, with references to 'pleasant' geography, island greatness and a unique way of life, is a trap of which Deller seems permanently on guard. During a short interview for BBC News, David Sillitoe who initially described the Stonehenge as 'sacred to Britain' drew Jeremy Deller towards this trap, that the work's 'British' reference connotes 'Britishness'. Deller's diffidently engaged response to bald questioning 'it's like British identity, no-one knows what it is, and you can't get close to anymore, you have to walk around it', was positioned within 'having a sense of humour, and being to look at your past with a wry smile, maybe'.²⁷

Deller's unfolding vision of Englishness is critical. His *English Magic* for the 2013 British Pavilion in Venice condemned the hyper-capitalist modern economy, typified by Roman Abramovich's yacht upended by a be-suited William Morris represented as an angered colossus. Once the polemical points were absorbed visitors could then enjoy a cup of tea, overlooking a wooded glade. Deller's awkward style is dependably tempered with such hospitably. This temperament is sometimes shared by Mark Wallinger whose model of *The White Horse at Ebbsfleet* (2009) appeared to contend with an earlier generation of organic - abstract British sculptors and their avoidance of representational references to regional iconography. *Sacrilege* and *The White Horse at Ebbsfleet* are symbolic of ways of thinking about Englishness within English visual legacy and landscape. But in adopting national themes both have also stared straight into the political machinations of the UK State. Deller reimagines the mythic symbols as resonating with contemporary events of the

nation; he has referred to the importance of ancient stone circle in comments and his diagrammatic wall drawings trace the ley-lines of contemporary popular culture, however his most well-known work is a full-scale live re-enactment of confrontation between police and picketing miners at a British Steel coking plant in South Yorkshire during the 1984 Miners Strike. Similarly Wallinger's statues of Christ and horses, or performing while dressed as bear or walking backwards at the bottom of the down escalator while reciting a gospel, contrasts the glib with the profound, and the myth with reality. His most poignant work is the retchingly horrific *State Britain* (2007) centred on the unrepresented persona of Brian Haws' during his 10-year protest and peace campaign (between 2001-11) at Parliament Square, London. Haws' condemnatory banners and explicit imagery of the injured and dead of Britain's war in Iraq and in Helmand were impeccably re-rendered by Wallinger in *State Britain* (2007).²⁸ The original and the simulacra were both morally compulsive displays and gut-churning in effect.

Englishness is a recognizably powerful visual culture that is known and acclaimed abroad in highbrow and lowbrow culture. Its magic can turn to horror. The 'Brits' play menacing roles as self-conscious and as a willful intellectual experiment, this is considered romantic because playing beastliness or even nastiness in this fashion can play as the flipside of decency. James Bond and his 'license to kill.' Meanwhile Hollywood screen monsters have been brought to life by that same type of intellectual malevolence, Hannibal Lecter as played by Brian Cox and Anthony Hopkins retrace the journey taken by English-born actor William Henry Pratt (Boris Karloff). The image of Lecter portrayed by Hopkins encased within his Perspex prison-cell has been much emulated. We think we can tame and control this savagery and even, as some of Lecter's prison wardens were wont to do, apply it experimentally as a weapon. This tendency towards intellectualized malevolence (which has proven very useful when applied in the theatre of conflict) is one which can be confronted and imaginatively represented. Hirst's *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living* (1991) can be understood in this malevolent context.²⁹ Hirst's sculpture hardly

advanced the state of sculpture, and the Tiger Shark is hardly indigenous to England's shores. However Hirst's cage-tank allows us to analyze an unbidden horror and the viewer's examination converts it into a kind of safe and useful knowledge.

Solitary Loner

As inevitably as this essay must include Pevsner it must now conclude with Orwell. The State has effectively vacated the disputatious context of Englishness only ever offering it up *a way of life* and often with recourse to Orwell. Orwell accounts for evolution in the field of Englishness as eminently productive. His oeuvre chronicles England in the middle of the last century, sometimes speculatively imagining its future, and his essays on writers such as H.G. Wells, Rudyard Kipling, George Gissing, Charles Dickens and even Anglo-Irish Jonathan Swift reinforce the notion of a distinctive English literary canon.³⁰ The canon is form by individualism and not through Schools. Orwell was a prolific reviewer, covering and writing from many parts of the world, not just England. But his gravestone stands in a pleasant English churchyard, Englishness is where his reputation resides, Englishness as dissidence.

Christopher Hitchens in his excellent *Why Orwell Matters* (2002) reflected on a passage from Raymond Williams, who identified George Orwell as an instance of the 'paradox of the exile' (also identified with D.H. Lawrence) and this constituted an actual 'tradition' which, in England, *attracts to itself many of the liberal virtues: empiricism, a certain integrity, frankness. It has also, as the normally contingent virtue of exile, certain qualities of perception: in particular the ability to distinguish inadequacies in the groups which have been rejected. It gives, also, an appearance of strength, although this is largely illusory. The qualities, although salutary, are largely negative; there is an appearance of hardness (the austere criticism of hypocrisy, complacency, self-deceit), but this is usually brittle, and at times hysterical: the absence of community is lacking, and the tension, in men of high quality, is great.*

Hitchens then said of Williams:

This is quite a fine passage, even when Williams is engaged in giving with one hand and taking away with the other. Orwell's working title for Nineteen Eighty-Four was 'The Last Man in Europe'; and there are traces of a kind of solipsistic nobility elsewhere in his work, the attitude of the flinty and solitary loner. May he [Orwell] not be valued, however,

as an English example of the dissident intellectual who preferred above all other allegiances the loyalty to truth?

Hitchens and Williams points are 'questions posed' and hence as constructive opportunities, broadly speaking what we can we point to and say 'that's Englishness in action'? If Englishness is difficult to define I don't believe, as some commentators do, that it has disappeared. Paul Langford's *Englishness Defined* (Oxford: O.U.P. 2000) attempted a definition of Englishness by its six chapter headings. Energy; Preserve; Candour; Decency; Taciturnity and Eccentricity. Undoubtedly this creates contrast and contradiction: attracted to magic and objectivity; a place of allegiance and Union, but engendering dissidence and solitary individualism. Here in this essay I have applied 'Englishness defined' to Britishness and reverse engineered the concept by having one of the regions define the totality. And then applied it to visual art. It is awkward, that is the point. If Englishness as characteristics can be disputed then its character also has definite correlations in individual artist's projects, ranging from the minimalist preserve of Bethan Huws' *Boat* (1983–2006) to flagrant eccentricism of Gilbert and George's *George the Cunt and Gilbert the Shit* (1969).³¹

The nations of Britain are like sticks of magnet, one side repels while the other side attracts; the nations are all facing North, and England increasingly with its back to Europe. England is considered a land of living rituals, lost kingdoms and the ruins of stoic fortress-defenders; it is also sturdy in things and with chippy solidarity; its many loner critics will point to the veracity of law, but still England keeps bending rules and flirting with danger, in sport, finance and governance. England is obsessed with time. And lingering at the shore's edge – others and our own. And so is Scotland. Anyone can tell you with conviction how it feels to be themselves, it is how peoples view each other and what keeps them apart and together again that requires understanding, and remains exciting. Artists have a continuing role to play in this, but only if they can be distinctive and undertake it without coercion – 'warts and all'.

Postscript

(The Once and Future King)

On a March morning in 2007, four months before he tendered his resignation, a circumspect Prime Minister Tony Blair spoke of national cultural renewal. Appositely at Tate Modern, Herzog and de Meuron's revitalization Giles Gilbert Scott's chimnied Bankside Power Station, and opposite Wren's domed St Paul's Cathedral. Blair's courtly audience, an English intelligentsia including Jeremy Deller, Lord (Melvyn) Bragg and Sir Norman Rosenthal, were reminded that New Labour had planned to make arts and culture an essential part of the narrative and character of a changed Britain.

Dynamism in arts and culture creates dynamism in a nation. [...] Because art, more than any programmes of government, worthy and necessary though those are, can make people consider, see things differently, understand where the other comes from.

What would have happened to the arts in Britain if not for Labour's support, Blair warned, his hubristic vision of unfolding ruination unwittingly as that which came to pass a few years later, 'regional theatres would have closed or would exist as shadows of themselves'. Blair's model for cultural renewal proposed government working hand-in-glove with the cultural sector, combining public funding with private enterprise which he characterized as 'subsidy and the box office together.' Blair's Golden Age speech noticed how the stimulation the arts encourages bold alternatives to our everyday thoughts and feelings, but this does not mean Museums are free from external dependency, even if they offer the kind of intellectual refuge and hospitableness to liberal thoughts and actions which Blair uncharacteristically advocated.

- 1 Homelands – A 21st Century Story of Home, Away, and All the Places in Between – Contemporary Art from the British Council Collection. Curated by Latika Gupta. IGNCA, Delhi 22 January – 14 February 2013, and touring Kolkata, Mumbai, Bengaluru.
- 2 However much this research relies upon catalogue essays, policy documents and related published research, it is led by a desire to understand my encounters, experiences and surprise incidents in the related geography, or in front of paintings, or in conversation. Reflective observations are synthesized with academic resources. This generalist and fragmented approach leads to conclusions, which are underpinned by some intuitive methodologies, that artists and other creative practitioners use. Rather than suggest this approach should replace the critical contextualization of art or other historical archival material, I believe it augments it. It is open to criticism and so invites discussion.
- 3 Vice-President Radhakrishnan, Sarvepalli, (later President), in Flag Code of India, www.mahapolice.gov.in/mahapolice/jsp/temp/.../flag_code_of_india.pdf
- 4 This echoes the approach of the earlier Camden Town group, 'little pictures for little people'.
- 5 Reprinted in Brown, Gordon, 'The golden thread that runs through our history', The Guardian, 8 July, 2004.
- 6 Deuchar, Stephen, Representing Britain 1500–2000 (London: Tate), 2000. p.8
- 7 Riach, Alan, Was there ever a 'British' Literature? (Glasgow: Association for Scottish Literary Studies, 2007), p. 15.
- 8 For extended discussion see Aughey, Arthur, 'What is Britain for?' in British Politics Review, Vol 4 /3 (1999), themed issue 'The Britishness debate – Identity issues in a contested United Kingdom': p 4 -45. 'The key concept here is not identity but allegiance. Nationalism is a political project to engineer the conformity of identity and allegiance. Britishness means diverse national identities within a common sovereign allegiance. For the moment, the United Kingdom remains the "primordial" or "civil" association within which the exploration of the desirability of the conditions takes place. And even at the instrumental level, there are also across the United Kingdom expectations among citizens that common standards in public services will be maintained. This applies even though the delivery of those major public services has been devolved since the solidarity of the civil association continues to be essential for their common funding.'
- 9 Radio Times, 14 October 1955.
- 10 Pevsner, Nikolaus, 'What is English in English Art', Deutsche Zukunft: Wochenzeitung für Politik, Wirtschaft und Kultur, 1934.
- 11 Harries, Susie, Nikolaus Pevsner: The Life (2011), p.488.
- 12 see Harries, S., p. 494 -5 for further discussion.
- 13 Parkinson, Ronald, John Constable: the man and his art (London: Victoria & Albert Museum, 1998), p. 129.
- 14 Quiney quoted in Harries (2011), p.500.
- 15 Vaughan, William, 'Pevsner's Art History', paper presented at 'Fifty Years of The Buildings of England' Conference, Victoria and Albert Museum. July, 2001.

- 16 Trying to define English art is a typical trait because of bureaucracies of value and assessment; refusing to provide definitive responses is even more an English trait. 'What is Englishness' entails responses that are not simply synonymous with Heritage and the accidents of geography. Profound difficulties arise as UK national institutions explicitly demand a response at the border but cultural institutions somehow avoid rules of inclusion and only implicitly arrive at vague responses.
- 17 Priestley, John Boynton, *English Journey, Being a Rambling but Truthful Account of What One Man Saw and Heard and Felt and Thought During a Journey Through England During the Autumn of the Year 1933* (London: Hienemann, Gollancz, 1934), p. 399.
- 18 Interestingly Maclean provides an important link back to Glasgow's New Image through his participation in the influential although pluralistically confusing 1982 Zeitgeist exhibition in Martin-Gropius-Bau, Berlin. Various commentators have wondered about Maclean's inclusion in Zeitgeist since (including one of the exhibition curators Sir Norman Rosenthal). This was conformed to me by Rosenthal himself, when I put the same question to him on 8th April 2014 at the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford during the installation of Joseph Beuys & Jörg Immendorff: *Art Belongs To The People!* (10 Apr – 31 August 2014). Interestingly I also asked about Immendorff's exclusion from Zeitgeist to which Sir Norman responded 'It would have been too German.'
- 19 *The Trophies of Empire* (1992 - 4) exhibition 'itinerary included Merseyside Maritime Museum, Liverpool, Bluecoat Gallery, and Arnolfini, the latter exhibition included Carole Drake, Edwina Fitzpatrick, Sunil Gupta, Shaheen Merali, Keith Piper, Donald Rodney, South Atlantic Souvenirs & Trouble, Veen Stephenson, and Live Art by Bandeley Iyapo.
- 20 In Rasheed Araeen's catalogue essay 'The Emergence of Black Consciousness in Contemporary Art in Britain: Seventeen years of Neglected History', for his initiated exhibition *The Essential Black Art* (Chisenhale Gallery, London 5 February – 5 March, 1988; Rasheed Araeen, Zarina Bhimji, Sutapa Biswas, Sonia Boyce, Eddie Chambers, Allan de Souza, Mona Hatoum, Gavin Jantjes, Keith Piper) he notes that 'To be specific to visual arts, which is our concern here, it was perhaps Eddie Chambers who for the first time used the term 'black art' in 1981, for an exhibition he organized at Wolverhampton Art Gallery': *The Essential Black Art* (1988), p.6. The exhibition in question was 'Black Art An' Done – An Exhibition of work by young Black Artists, 9 – 27 June, 1981.
- 21 In 2013 British Poet Laureate Carol Ann Duffy helped mastermind an evening of poetry readings in Buckingham Palace to celebrate the Queen's 66th wedding anniversary. The Queen plays a central role as a cipher upon whom so much is projected, of continuity, of decorum, in England, and yet here were Belfast Laureate Sinead Morrissey, Welsh Laureate Gillian Clarke, Scotland's Elizabeth Lochhead all performing readings, as did John Agard, perhaps, it might be said, representing black Britain. Agard's role here is complex, a testament to hard-won representation.
- 22 Chambers, Eddie, 'The Art of Donald Rodney', in Donald Rodney: *Doublethink* (London: Autograph, 2003), p.35.
- 23 Tawadros, Gilane, 'Sweet Oblivion', in *Trophies of Empire* (Liverpool: Bluecoat Gallery, 1994), p.19.
- 24 The other educational-institution based group appeared in Glasgow and like their counterparts in London redeveloped maligned conceptual legacies. The ubiquity of sculpture and video was similar to that of the Goldsmiths group with elements of social critique and processes more often linked to design and craft (or re-appropriated). Scottish themes seemed present; history of medicine, football, nostalgia, although none in the genre of landscape.
- 25 One generation after Pevsner's Leith lectures Britain's grouping of late-modernist art practitioners, including Richard Long, Gilbert and George, and Art and Language, were identified in an exhibition at The Hayward Gallery in 1972 – *The New Art*. Curated by Anne Seymour the exhibition included Art & Language, Victor Burgin, Gilbert and George, Richard Long, Keith Arnatt, Michael Craig-Martin, David Dye, Barry Flanagan, Hamish Fulton, John Hilliard, Keith Milow, Gerald Newman, John Stezaker, David Tremlett. Later the critic William Wood proposed this exhibition was the key moment at which 'ephemeral and transient aspects of English Conceptual art, those aspects that had attached these English artists to an undeniably international movement, were officially recognized...' (Wood, William, 'Still You Ask For More: Demand, Display and "The New Art"', in *Rewriting Conceptual Art*, eds Michael Newman and Jon Bird (London: Reaktion, 1999), pp. 66 – 67. While looking back now at this seminal exhibition, much of which might easily have been said to exemplify Pevsner's characterization: 'humour, reserve, pragmatism, stoicism, tolerance and a spirit of compromise'.
- 26 Jeremy Deller, 'Stonehenge you can bounce on', BBC News, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/go/em/fr/-/news/entertainment-arts-17777997> (accessed June 10, 2014).
- 27 David Sillito, 'Stonehenge you can bounce on', BBC News, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/go/em/fr/-/news/entertainment-arts-17777997> (accessed June 10, 2014).
- 28 Haws long protest chimes with Orwell's observation in *The Lion and the Unicorn: Socialism and the English Genius* (1941) that 'The heirs of Nelson and of Cromwell are not in the House of Lords. They are in the fields and the streets, in the factories and the armed forces, in the four-ale bar and the suburban back garden; and at present they are still kept under by a generation of ghosts.'
- 29 Intriguingly these two sharp-teethed British icons, Hirst's 'shark' and Hopkins' Lecter, appeared in the popular realm within the space of a year.
- 30 Clarke, Ben, 'Englishness', in *Orwell in Context: Communities, Myths, Values* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), p.126.
- 31 For example *Energy: Damien Hirst, The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living* (1991); *Preserve: Bethan Huws, Boats* (1983-2006); *Candour* (Haws' Parliament Square protest replicated); Mark Wallinger, *State Britain* (2007); *Decency* (the requirements of civic diversity and inclusivity); Jeremy Deller, *Sacrilege* (2012); *Taciturnity: Lucien Freud, The Painter's Mother IV* (1973) and finally, for *Eccentricity: Gilbert & George, George the Cunt and Gilbert the Shit* (1969).

(permissions Andrew McNeillie has agreed the publication of a stanza from Cynefin Glossed.)